Living and loving beyond the heteronorm

A queer analysis of personal relationships in the twenty-first century

Sasha Roseneil
29 May 2007

The organization of personal life and “the family” has transformed significantly over the past thirty years. Sociologists must start to de-centre the family and the heterosexual couple in our intellectual imaginations. Sasha Roseneil argues for casting a queer lens on intimacy and care, demanding that sociologists study those who are not part of conventional families or couples.

In the West, at the start of the twenty-first century, more and more people are spending longer periods of their lives outside the conventional family unit[1]. Processes of individualization are challenging the romantic heterosexual couple and the modern family formation it has supported, and the normative grip of the sexual and gender order which has underpinned the modern family is weakening. In this context, much that matters to people in their personal lives increasingly takes place beyond “the family”, between partners who are not living together “as family”, and within networks of friends.

This article develops a queer analytic model for the study of personal relationships, which is grounded in an appreciation of the variety of ways people live outside the heteronorm. Its central argument is that if we are to understand the current state, and likely future, of personal relationships, sociologists should de-centre the family and the heterosexual couple in our intellectual imaginaries. The first section provides a critique of sociology for the heteronormative frameworks within which it has studied personal relationships. The second section then proposes an extension of the framework for the analysis of contemporary transformations in the realm of intimacy, arguing for the importance of a queer analysis of social change, and “suggests that there is a need for research focusing on those living at the cutting edge of social change. The article ends with an overview of the findings of my research on the relationship practices of those who are living and loving beyond the heteronorm.

Thinking beyond the heteronormative family
As the global success of a plethora of television series such as “Friends”, “Seinfeld”, “Ellen”, and “Will and Grace” attests, popular culture is proving rather better than sociology at proffering stories which explore the burgeoning diversity of personal lives. In each of these programmes it is the sociability of a group of friends, rather than a conventional family, that provides the love, care, and support essential to everyday life in the city. The popularity of these programmes suggests that they speak in significant ways to the lives of their viewers. Yet if we seek our understanding of relationships from sociological literature, it seems as if love, intimacy, and care are almost exclusively practised under the auspices of “family”.

There have been significant shifts within specific sub-fields of the sociologies of family and gender. For example, they have sought to meet both the empirical challenge of changes in family and gender relations, and the theoretical challenge of anti-essentialist, postmodern, black, and minority ethnic feminist, and lesbian and gay emphases on difference and diversity. They have, most notably, moved on from an early focus on the study of “family and community”, which were “yoked together like Siamese twins”[2], through the early phase of feminist intervention, which focused on unequal gender divisions of care and intimacy in the family[3], to a predominant concern today with the analysis of family change – particularly through the study of divorce, re-partnering, and co-habitation – and recognition of family diversity.[4]

Moreover, many family sociologists have engaged with the problem of the concept of “family”, in a time of increasing levels of family breakdown and re-formation. David Morgan[5], for instance, suggests that we should use “family” not as a noun, but as an adjective, and proposes a notion of “family practices” to counter the reification of the concept. Others have sought to deal with social change and the challenges posed by lesbian and gay movements and theorists by pluralizing the notion of “family”, so that they now always speak of “families”. The approach currently dominant in Anglo-American sociologies of gender and family emphasizes the diversity of family forms and experiences, and how the membership of families changes over time, as they breakdown and re-form. Certainly in its more liberal-minded incarnations, this approach welcomes lesbian and gay “families of choice” into the “family tent”.[6]

This shift has been an important one. It acts as a counter to the explicitly anti-gay and anti-feminist political discourse of “family values”, which developed in the US and UK during the 1980s and 1990s.[7] However, these moves to pluralize notions of “family”, even when they embrace the study of lesbian and gay families, are insufficient to the task of understanding the full range of contemporary formations of personal life for two reasons. Firstly, they leave unchanged the heteronormativity of the sociological imaginary; and secondly, they are grounded in an inadequate analysis of contemporary social change.

Sociology continues to marginalize the study of love, intimacy, and care beyond the “family”, even though it has expanded the scope covered by this term to include a wider range of “families of choice”.[8] The discipline is undergirded by heteronormative assumptions; in other words by “institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent – that is, organized as a sexuality – but also privileged.”[9] Researchers still produce analyses which are overwhelmingly focused on monogamous, dyadic, co-residential (and primarily hetero)
sexual relationships, particularly those which have produced children, and on changes within these relationships. Jo Van Every’s systematic survey of British sociological research and writing on families and households published in 1993 found “an overwhelming focus on the ‘modern nuclear family’” consisting of married couples who lived together in households only with their children. She argues convincingly that “despite all the sociological talk about the difficulty of defining families and the plurality and diversity of family forms in contemporary (postmodern?) societies, sociologists were helping to construct a “normal” family which looked remarkably similar to that which an earlier generation of sociologists felt confident to define”.

The “non-standard intimacies” created by those living non-normative sexualities pose a particular challenge to a discipline which has studied personal life primarily through the study of families. Some lesbians and gay men refer to their emotional networks quite consciously – often with a knowing irony – as “family”. However, when writers such as Kath Weston, Jeffrey Weeks et al., and Judith Stacey adopt the term “families of choice” to refer to lesbian and gay relationships and friendship networks, this may actually direct attention away from the extra-familial, radically counter-heteronormative nature of many of these relationships.

Considerable evidence from sociological and anthropological research suggests that friendship is particularly important to lesbians and gay men. Networks of friends form the context within which lesbians and gay men lead their personal lives, offering emotional continuity, companionship, pleasure, and practical assistance. Sometimes rejected, problematized, and excluded by their families of origin, lesbians and gay men build and maintain lives outside the framework of the heterosexual nuclear family, grounding their emotional security and daily lives in their friendship groups. Weeks, Heaphy, and Donovan, and Roseneil draw attention to the blurring of the boundaries, and movement, between friendship and sexual relationships which often characterizes contemporary lesbian and gay intimacies. Friends become lovers, lovers become friends, and many have multiple sexual partners of varying degrees of commitment (and none). Indeed, an individual’s “significant other” may not be someone with whom she or he has a sexual relationship. Non-heteronormative intimacies – significant, life-defining relationships between friends, non-monogamous lovers, ex-lovers, partners who do not live together, partners who do not have sex together, those which do not easily fit the “friend/”lover” binary classification system – and the networks of relationships within which these intimacies are sustained (or not) have the following significance: they de-centre the primary significance that is commonly granted to sexual partnerships, and they mount a challenge to the privileging of conjugal relationships in research on intimacy. These practices, relationships, and networks largely fail to be registered in a sociological literature retaining an imaginary which, without ever explicitly acknowledging it, sees the heterosexual couple as the heart of the social formation, as that which pumps the life-blood of social reproduction.

In fact, little has changed since Beth Hess pointed out in 1979 that there is “no large corpus called the ‘sociology of friendship’” to provide an alternative archive for the study of intimacy and care beyond the family. But it is not just the heteronormativity of the discipline which has rendered friendship largely invisible. Equally important is the fact that the sociological tradition, from the founding fathers onwards – Tonnies’s distinction between gemeinschaft and gesellschraft, Marx’s work on alienation, Durkheim
on forms of social solidarity, Weber on bureaucratization, the Chicago school on urbanization – has assumed that the development of modernity renders social relationships increasingly impersonal, and affective bonding is seen as increasingly marginal. The result is that the discipline has never granted as much importance to the study of informal, private, and sociable relationships as it has to matters of public, economic, and political organization.[21]

Friendship lies in the realm of the pleasurable, emotional, and affective, areas which have been relatively neglected by serious-minded order-seeking sociologists concerned with issues of structure, regulation, and institutionalization. There have been exceptions, as in the work of Simmel[22], in the ethnographic work of Whyte[23] on “street corner society”, of Litwak and Szelenyi[24] on “primary groups” of kin and friends, and in the 1950s and 1960s, in the British tradition of community studies. More recently there have been a small number of studies of friendship,[25] and there is a growing field of research on new forms of sociability facilitated by new technologies,[26] but there is no sub-field of the discipline devoted to the study of friendship comparable to the well-established sociology of family and kinship. It is time for this to change, time for more research which focuses on friendship, “non-conventional” forms of sexual/love relationships, and the interconnections between the two.

Queer social change and the analysis of contemporary personal life

A substantial body of literature takes as its starting point the belief that we are living through a period of profound social change in the organization of contemporary personal life. For example, in the context of a wider argument about the undoing of patriarchalism, Manuel Castells suggests that the patriarchal family is under intense challenge, and that lesbian, gay, and feminist movements around the world are key to understanding this challenge.[27] Anthony Giddens’s argument[28] about the “transformation of intimacy” and Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim’s work[29] on the changing meanings and practices of love and family relationships suggests that in the contemporary world processes of individualization and de-traditionalization, and increased self-reflexivity are opening up new possibilities and expectations in heterosexual relationships.[30]

With a (rather cursory) nod in the direction of feminist scholarship and activism, such work recognizes the significance of the shifts in gender relations mainly due to the changed consciousness and identities which women have developed in the wake of the women’s liberation movement. Giddens considers the transformation of intimacy currently in train of “great, and generalizable, importance”. [31] He charts changes in the nature of marriage such as the emergence of the “pure relationship” characterized by “confluent love”, a relationship of sexual and emotional equality between men and women. He links this with the development of “plastic sexuality” freed from “the needs of reproduction”. [32] He identifies lesbians and gay men as “pioneers” in the pure relationship and plastic sexuality, and hence at the forefront of processes of individualization and de-traditionalization. [33] Beck and Beck-Gernsheim argue that “the ethic of individual self-fulfilment and achievement is the most powerful current in modern society”. [34] They believe that the desire to be “a deciding, shaping human being who aspires to be the author of his/her life” is giving rise to unprecedented changes in the shape of family life. Family membership shifts from being a given, to a matter of choice.
As social ties become reflexive, and individualization increasingly characterizes relations among members of the same family, we are moving into a world of the “post-familial family”[35].

Whilst this body of work perhaps over-states the degree of change, and underplays the continuance of gender inequalities and class differences in intimate life,[36] it maps the theoretical terrain from which investigations of the future of personal life must proceed, and it has proved extremely influential on those conducting empirical research on family change. However, this body of literature does not exhaust the resources for theoretical analysis of contemporary social change on which those seeking to understand cultures of intimacy and care should draw. It is important that we consider also how the wider sexual organization of the social is undergoing transformation.

I want to suggest that we are currently witnessing a significant destabilization of the homosexual/heterosexual binary which has characterized the modern sexual order. The hierarchical relationship between the two sides of the binary, and its mapping onto an inside/out[37] opposition is undergoing intense challenge. There are a number of “queer tendencies”[38] at work in the contemporary world which are contributing to this fracturing of the binary. For example, there is a trend towards the “normalization” of the homosexual[39] in most Western nations, as there are progressive moves towards the equalization of legal and social conditions for lesbians and gay men.[40] The passing in the UK of the Civil Partnerships Act in 2004 is one of the most obvious examples of this, granting as it does a legal status close to marriage for lesbian and gay couples who choose to register their partnership. This brings some lesbians and gay men institutionally much closer to the heteronorm, and marks a significant shift in public understandings of the notion of a conjugal couple. Homosexual and heterosexual ways of life thus become less marked as different by law, social policy, and in public culture.[41]

Most significantly, for my argument here, there is a tendency towards the de-centring of hetero-relations, both socially and at the level of the individual. The heterosexual couple, and particularly the married, co-resident heterosexual couple with children, no longer occupies the centre ground of Western societies, and cannot be taken for granted as the basic unit in society. This is a result of the social changes outlined earlier, particularly the rise in divorce, births outside marriage, lone parenthood, solo living, and not having children. Individuals are being released from traditional heterosexual scripts and the patterns of hetero-relationality which accompany them. Across Europe, North America, and Australia, the conventional family is now very much a minority practice. For instance in Great Britain, between 1971 and 2005 the proportion of households that were composed of a heterosexual couple with dependent children fell from 35 per cent to 22 per cent, and the percentage of the population living as part of such a household fell from 52 per cent to 37 per cent.[42] The proportion of lone-parent households more than doubled, from 3 per cent to 7 per cent[43], and one-person households soared from 18 per cent to 29 per cent, with the greatest increase, from 6 per cent to 15 per cent, amongst those under retirement age, and particularly amongst those between 25 and 44, the age group most expected to be settled into a reproductive heterosexual couple.[44] All this means that contemporary living arrangements are diverse, fluid, and unresolved, and that hetero-relations are no longer as hegemonic as they once were.

A few sociologists have started to recognize the significance of these changes in the
sexual organization of the social. Judith Stacey understands them in terms of the “queering of the family”: meanings of family are undergoing radical challenges, as more and more kinship groups have to come to terms with the diverse sexual practices and living arrangements chosen by their own family members. She suggests that there can now be few families which do not include at least some members who diverge from traditional, normative heterorelational practice, whether as divorcees, unmarried mothers and fathers, lesbians, gay men, or bisexuals. Anthony Giddens’s remark that lesbians and gay men are forging new paths for heterosexuals as well as for themselves is picked up by Jeffrey Weeks, Brian Heaphy, and Catherine Donovan, who suggest that “one of the most remarkable features of domestic change over recent years is […] the emergence of common patterns in both homosexual and heterosexual ways of life as a result of these long-term shifts in relationship patterns.” They see both homosexuals and heterosexuals increasingly yearning for a “pure relationship”, experiencing love as contingent, and confluent, and seeking to live their sexual relationships in terms of a friendship ethic.

What this suggests is that there is a need for more research exploring the personal lives of those who are in the avant-garde of these processes of social change. The “Care, Friendship, and Non-Conventional Partnership Project” sets out to do just that.

**Living and loving beyond the heteronorm**

The de-centring of hetero-relations pointed to by aggregate level statistics provides the backdrop to my own qualitative research into contemporary practices of personal life. The “Care, Friendship, and Non-Conventional Partnership Project” started from the recognition that more and more people are living outside conventional hetero-relations, and focused on those who might be considered the most “individualized” in our society – people who do not live with a partner. The research explored who matters to people who are living outside the conventional heteronormative couple, what they value about their personal relationships, how they care for those who matter to them, and how they care for themselves.

In-depth interviews were carried out with 53 people aged between 25 and 60 in three locations in northern England - a former mining town that is relatively conventional in terms of gender and family relations; a small town in which alternative, middle-class, “downshifted” lifestyles and sexual nonconformity are common; and a multi-ethnic inner-city area characterized by a range of gender and family practices, a higher-than-average proportion of women in the labour force, and a large number of single-person and non-couple households. The sample included men and women, with and without children, of a range of ages, ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds, occupations, and sexual orientations, and with varying household living arrangements. This gave detailed insight into the contours and textures of the personal lives of a sample of individuals who do not live in the queer metropolis, and very few of whom identify in any way as gender or sexual radicals. Yet the research found evidence of some decidedly counter-heteronormative practices of intimacy. These were: the prioritizing of friendship, the de-centring of sexual/love relationships within individuals’ life narratives, and experimenting beyond heteronormative conjugality.

Across the sample, men and women from all three localities, of a range of ages, lifestyles,
occupations, and sexualities placed a high value on their friends and their friendships. Friendship occupied a central place in their personal lives. There was a strong discourse about the importance of and need for friendship in a changing and insecure world. Friends appeared more often than parents or siblings in the innermost circle of the relationship maps we asked interviewees to draw, and there was little difference between those who were in couple relationships and those who were single in terms of the importance of friends. It was friends who provided most of the emotional care and support the interviewees received, particularly when sexual/love relationships ended, and much of the practical day-to-day assistance and support as well. Most interviewees had a combination of long-established and more recent friendships in their “personal community”[^49], and most had a range of more and less close friends. Many had an elective community, a cluster of friends, who lived locally, and some had been involved in actively constructing a neighbourhood community of friends, either by moving to be near friends, or encouraging friends to move nearer to them. These local friendship networks socialized together and engaged in reciprocal childcare and other forms of support.[^50] The physical space of the home, culturally associated in Britain since the rise of the companionate marriage model with the conjugal couple and the nuclear family, became a much less privatized place, open to the visits of friends, who would “hang out”, and sometimes stay for extended periods, particularly during times of personal crisis. A number of interviewees considered ex-lovers/partners/spouses to be close friends, and there was a notable degree of movement between the categories of friend and lover.

In parallel with the importance accorded to friendship came a de-centring of sexual/love relationships in the narratives of the interviewees. There was a clear tendency to de-emphasize the couple relationship, both amongst those in relationships and those who were single. Only one of the interviewees saw her partner as the most important person in her life, to the exclusion of others. She was a recent migrant to Britain whose family lived overseas. For everyone else, the people who mattered were either friends or a combination of friends, partner, children, and family. What this meant was that the sexual/love relationship was rarely constructed as the exclusive space of intimacy, and indeed for many it was not even the primary space of intimacy. This de-centring of the sexual/love relationship was understood self-reflexively by many interviewees as consequent on the experience of divorce or the ending of a long-term cohabiting relationship; the pain and disruption this caused was seen as giving rise to a new orientation to relationships – the linked downplaying of sexual/love relationships and the increased valuing of friendships. This was not a temporary phase and people did not return to conventional couple relationships as soon as an opportunity arose. Re-interviewing people between a year and a half and two years later, there was a remarkably consistent prioritization of friendship.

The heteronormative companionate conjugal couple model[^51], which determines the sexual/love relationship to be co-residential (if no longer married), the primary (if not exclusive) space of intimacy, and to be moving in this direction, if not yet achieved, was, therefore, overwhelmingly not the practice of the people interviewed in this research.[^52] Very few expressed a conscious yearning to be part of a conventional co-habiting couple or family. In not conforming to the dominant heteronormative relationship teleology, which posits that a relationship should be “going somewhere” – that somewhere being shared residence and long-term commitment – sexual/love relationships were described instead as being about the construction of mutual pleasure in the present. As such they
involved a significant degree of conscious, reflexive thought, and discussion and negotiation. Of the interviewees with partners, almost all had chosen not to live together. Very few saw cohabitation as the inevitable and desirable next stage of their relationship, and were thus implicitly challenging the expectation that sexual relationships logically and inexorably should move towards cohabitation and “settling down”. Across differences of socio-economic class, gender, and sexuality, and with only a few exceptions, cohabitation was not constructed as an unequivocally desired goal by the interviewees. They were overwhelmingly positive about not living with their partner, and almost all regarded non-residential relationships as valid ways of living in their own right, not as a stepping stone on the journey towards a “proper” relationship. Many of these relationships also shared a rejection of the romance narrative, clearly separating sex from romance, with a small number of heterosexual relationships offering clear parallels to the “fuck buddies” of several of the gay men who were interviewed.

Underlying these orientations was a widespread and profound ambivalence about the cohabiting couple form. Many of the interviewees’ sexual/love relationships were being conducted outside a paradigm of “settling”, and were very much works in progress – understood and accepted as contingent, unresolved, and fluid. This description has resonance with Giddens’s notion of the “pure relationship”[53] and Bauman’s metaphor of “liquid love”[54]. Whilst I have been critical elsewhere of what I have called the “patriarchal pessimism”[55] of Bauman’s account of contemporary intimate life, with its nostalgia for bygone days of stable families and secure communities, the processual, undecided character of many of the sexual/love relationships in this study echoes some of the themes of Bauman’s analysis.

**Concluding comments**

What this research suggests is that sociologists are largely failing to see the extent to which, often as a matter of preference, people are substituting the ties of friendship for those of blood, particularly in terms of everyday care and emotional support. The discipline is failing to register the ways in which the relationships at the heart of many people’s intimate lives cannot be understood in terms of “the family”. Casting a queer lens on intimacy and care demands that sociologists study those who are not part of conventional families or couples. As more and more people are spending significant parts of their lives outside these forms of relationships, this offers us a perspective on those who are living at the cutting edge of social change. In the context of individualization and the destabilization of the homosexual/heterosexual binary, practices of intimacy and care can no longer – if indeed they ever could – be understood solely through a focus on families and kin. Indeed, an exploration of networks and flows of intimacy and care, the extent and pattern of such networks, the viscosity and velocity of such flows, and the implications of their absence, is likely to prove much more fruitful for future research than attempts to interpret contemporary personal lives through re-definitions of the concept of “family”[56]. Focusing the sociological gaze on intimacies and practices of care wherever they take place – in domestic spaces, public spaces, work spaces, virtual spaces – between friends, sexual partners, family, neighbours, work colleagues, civil acquaintances – will bring to light practices of intimacy and care associated with these practices, that have rarely been studied by sociologists of the family. A new sociology of personal relationships is needed which can register a fuller range of practices of intimacy and care.
This article has cast a queer lens on contemporary processes of social change, expanding sociological understandings of transformations in personal life beyond their focus on the family and heterosexual intimacies, in order that non-heteronormative practices could be registered that rarely enter the sociological agenda. The personal practices of the people in my research – the prioritizing of friendship, the related de-prioritizing of sexual/love relationships, and experimentation with sexual/love relationships beyond the conventional couple form – are potentially of great significance for sociology. Although it was a relatively small-scale study, because this group of people is at the forefront of processes of individualization and is a fast-growing sector of the population, the findings of my research point to an important emerging social trend, the queering of personal life. More and more people are living lives which challenge the division of the social into heterosexual and homosexual ways of being, and which contest the normativities of heterosexuality and hetero-relationality. Practices which might previously have been regarded as distinctively “homosexual”, such as making friendship central in life, and rejecting the conventional cohabiting conjugality, are becoming more widespread, as intimate life increasingly exceeds not just the category of “family” but also the couple form.

This convergence between homosexual and heterosexual ways of life amongst people at one end of the spectrum of individualization is happening in parallel to a similar convergence at the other end of the spectrum, amongst those choosing coupledom, cohabitation, and often children, as civil/domestic partnership, or marriage, becomes available to same-sex partners on similar terms to traditional heterosexual marriage in many countries. Whilst it might be too early to declare the end of the heterosexual/homosexual hierarchy, the binary is becoming increasingly unstable.

References:


Ibid., 167


[30] The research of Finch, J., 1989, ibid., and Finch, J. and J. Mason, *Negotiating Family Responsibilities*, London: Routledge 1993 on family obligations suggests that family ties are now understood less in terms of obligations constituted by fixed ties of blood, and more in terms of negotiated commitments, which are less clearly differentiated from other relationships.


[33] In this acknowledgement of non-heterosexual identities and practices, Giddens’s work differs from that of Beck and Beck-Gernscheim, whose discussion fails to acknowledge its exclusive concern with heterosexuality.


[40] Adam, B., “Families without Heterosexuality: challenges of same-sex partnership recognition”, Paper presented to ESRC Research Group for the Study of Care, Values and


[43] This figure is for lone parents with dependent children.

[44] Ibid. I acknowledge that the majority of births outside marriage are to co-habiting couples, and in general, I acknowledge the increase in the prevalence (Ermisch, J. and Francesoni, M., “Cohabitation in Great Britain: not for long, but here to stay”, Journal of the Royal Statistical Society, Series A, 163(2) (2000): 153-171; Lewis, J., The End of Marriage? Individualism and Intimate Relations, Edward Elgar: Cheltenham 2001) and the social acceptability of co-habitation amongst heterosexual couples (Barlow, A., S. Duncan, G. James, and A. Park “Just a Piece of Paper? Marriage and Cohabitation in Britain”, in A. Park, J. Curtice, K. Thomson, L. Jarvis and C. Bromley (eds.), British Social Attitudes: The 18th Report, London: Sage 2001). This does not, however, diminish the argument about the significance of the social de-centring of, firstly, the married heterosexual couple, and secondly, the heterosexual couple, per se.


[48] This project was led by Sasha Roseneil, with Shelley Budgeon and Jacqui Gabb as research fellows. For a more detailed discussion of the methodology and findings, see Budgeon, S. and S. Roseneil, op. cit. For other work on intimacy and care beyond the conventional family, see contributions to Budgeon, S. and S. Roseneil, op. cit.


[52] For a more detailed discussion of non-cohabitation amongst the interviewees, see


**Published 29 May 2007**

Original in [English](https://www.eurozine.com/living-and-loving-beyond-the-heteronorm/)
Downloaded from eurozine.com (https://www.eurozine.com/living-and-loving-beyond-the-heteronorm/)
© Sasha Roseneil / Revista Crítica de Ciências Sociais / Eurozine